

Developing an agenda for the history of women religious in Ireland: historiography and potentiality

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ABSTRACT. In *'An Agenda for women's history in Ireland, 1500–1900'* (1992), Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd and Maria Luddy noted that research on convents and women religious (nuns/sisters) in Ireland was beginning to open up in the 1980s. They also suggested areas that merited the attention of scholars, including the experience of vowed religious life by women, issues of class and power within Irish convents, and the role of nuns in Irish society. This article examines historiographical developments, with a view to seeing whether or not scholars rose to the challenges posed in 1992. Additionally, it considers areas that still demand attention.

In their ground-breaking article, 'An agenda for women's history in Ireland, 1500–1900', Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd and Maria Luddy signalled the importance in scholarship of research on Irish women religious.¹ They suggested that research on convents and sisters in Ireland was beginning to open up in the 1980s, particularly with the publication of Caitriona Clear's *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland* in 1987.² They also argued that this area of enquiry had immense potential for historians, and they noted areas that merited immediate attention: class and power within convents; religious life as an alternative to marriage and motherhood; biographical research on nuns in leadership; and the role of nuns in Irish society. These were some of the areas that were identified as worthy of the attention of scholars. The authors also pointed to areas of research that could help embed the history of women religious firmly within both women's history and social history.

Thirty years later, it is both instructional and timely to examine historiographical developments, with a view to seeing whether or not scholars rose to the challenges posed in 1992. Additionally, it is useful to consider areas that still demand attention, and to signal new possibilities arising from increased access to archives and digital

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¹ Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd, and Maria Luddy, 'An agenda for women's history in Ireland, 1500–1900' in *I.H.S.*, xxviii, no.109 (May 1992), pp 1–37. The terms 'nuns', 'sisters' and 'women religious' are used interchangeably in scholarship and in common use, as are the terms 'order' and 'congregation'. In this article, I use these terms interchangeably, and avoid compromising the online searchability of the article. Strictly speaking, members of religious orders are nuns who take solemn vows and are distinguished from members of religious congregations, or sisters, who take simple vows.

² Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 1987).

sources. However, as the article will note, there are still barriers for scholars who want to undertake research in this area, and it is for this reason that I have referred, in the title of this article, to ‘potentiality’ rather than ‘potential’. While the latter indicates capacity to do, the former indicates the possibility of there being potential. I believe we are still researching at a time when many possibilities for potential research exist, but that potential will only be unleashed when certain barriers have been removed.

This article, then, uses the points raised by Luddy as a springboard to consider the status of history of women religious in Ireland, with reference to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first part of the article comprises a historiography, which is ordered in a series of themes and which notes some gaps in the research. Part two addresses in detail some of the main areas that now demand attention. It also notes the fact that lack of access to some archives still presents scholars with a regrettable impasse.

I

As Coburn and Smith have argued, ‘women religious were among the most publicly active of late nineteenth and early twentieth century women ... women from working class and middle-class backgrounds, regardless of ethnic group, could advance in teaching, nursing, administration and ... leadership’.³ While the vowed nature of religious life meant that it involved living by rigid rules, it could still be liberating for Irish women. It offered them security, shelter and community life; it gave many women the kind of education that their own families could not afford to give them; it allowed some to attain positions of leadership in schools, colleges and hospitals; and it gave thousands the opportunity to travel to parts of the world that most Irish people would only ever hear about.⁴ Religious life also provided women with the wherewithal to respond to their own sense of vocation: indeed, a sense of religious ‘calling’ or ‘mission’ is perhaps the least researched aspect of the history of nuns.⁵

An interest in the field generally has been growing, albeit slowly, since the 1980s. An early contributor to scholarship in this area was Tony Fahey, whose unpublished Ph.D., completed in 1981, surveyed the growth of Irish convents in the nineteenth century.⁶ In a chapter published in 1987, Fahey drew attention to some important statistics concerning the rate of growth, and the numbers of Irish women who entered convents. He also noted that, despite there being ‘some impressionistic

³ Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, ‘Creating community and identity: exploring religious and gender ideology in the lives of American women religious, 1836–1920’ in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, xiv, no. 1 (1996), p. 104.

⁴ Several scholars discuss the motivations for Irish women to enter religious orders, including Suellen Hoy, ‘The recruitment and emigration of Irish religious women to the United States, 1812–1914’ in *Journal of Women’s History*, vi, no. 4 / vii, no. 1 (winter/spring 1995), p. 64; and Deirdre Raftery, ‘“Je suis d’aucune Nation”: the recruitment and identity of Irish women religious in the international mission field, c.1840–1940’ in *Paedagogica Historica*, xlix, no. 4 (2013), pp 518–22.

⁵ Deirdre Raftery, ‘The “mission” of nuns in female education in Ireland, c.1850–1950’ in *Paedagogica Historica*, xlvi, no. 2 (2012), pp 310–11.

⁶ Tony Fahey, ‘Female asceticism in the Catholic Church: a case study of nuns in Ireland in the nineteenth century’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1982).

information’ on nuns, little was known about ‘the family backgrounds, social class backgrounds, geographic origins or educational attainments of those who chose the religious life’.⁷ His work analysing census data on nuns and Catholic lay women was subsequently drawn on by many scholars, including Caitriona Clear and Mary Peckham Magray, who published the only major studies attempting to analyse convent expansion and religious life for women in nineteenth-century Ireland.⁸ There remains a need for the kind of research noted by Fahey, that closely examines the backgrounds of women religious and patterns of entrance to religious life within families, and in different parts of the country.

Fahey argued that educational work of women religious was shaped by the growth of nineteenth-century mass education; nuns ‘linked themselves to the secular project of social organisation’ and became a source of cheap labour.⁹ Additionally, they were largely self-supporting, and were adept at running fundraising events.¹⁰ In considering how the growth of the conventual movement affected Irish women, Fahey concluded that the work of nuns ‘remained within the traditional women’s sphere of caring and nurturing — tending to the sick, teaching simple religious truths to the poor and to children, training older girls in modesty and industry’.¹¹ In short, he concluded that the new roles for women that became available through religious life in ‘active’ orders was not ‘shattering the limitations imposed on women in the Catholic tradition’.¹² Nuns, he argued ‘were not overt champions of women’s rights in the modern sense’ and, in his view, their impact on the development of women’s social status was unknown.¹³

Fahey’s thesis did not provoke the start of a systematic study of women religious. In fact, it provided a view of nuns and the Catholic Church that went largely uncontested for some seventeen years, until Mary Peckham Magray’s innovative monograph, *The transforming power of the nuns: women, religion and cultural change in Ireland, 1750–1900*, was published in 1998. Caitriona Clear’s study, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*, had appeared in 1987, providing important insights into congregational life and hinting at the kind of scholarship that was possible when access to congregational archives was granted. Luddy, in the ‘Agenda’, noted that Clear’s work ‘opened the way’ for scholars interested in convent life.¹⁴ In particular, it served to remind readers of the extensive network of convents that developed in the nineteenth century. As Luddy commented, this vast network gave ‘single women ... the opportunity of engaging in socially useful work at a time

⁷ Tony Fahey, ‘Nuns in the Catholic Church in Ireland in the nineteenth century’ in Mary Cullen (ed.), *Girls don’t do honours: Irish women in education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Dublin, 1987), p. 14.

⁸ Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*; Mary Peckham Magray, *The transforming power of the nuns: women, religion and cultural change in Ireland, 1750–1900* (Oxford, 1998). For work by Clear which draws attention to Irish Catholic women who did have a ‘voice’ and influence, see Caitriona Clear, ‘The voices of Catholic women in Ireland, 1800–1921’ in Oliver P. Rafferty (ed.) *Irish Catholic identities* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 199–210.

⁹ Fahey, ‘Nuns in the Catholic Church’, p. 17.

¹⁰ See Deirdre Raftery, Caitriona Delaney and Catherine Nowlan-Roebuck, *Nano Nagle, the life and the legacy* (Dublin, 2019), p. 38.

¹¹ Fahey, ‘Nuns in the Catholic Church’, p. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴ MacCurtain, O’Dowd & Luddy, ‘Agenda’, p. 21.

when women were generally denied such opportunity'.¹⁵ Luddy argued that the establishment of convents 'envisaged a freedom for women which was compatible with traditional Christianity and subject to the acquiescence of the patriarchal church'.¹⁶ Clear's work confirmed this position and presented women religious as having little autonomy. They occupied a lowly position within the hierarchy of the institutional Catholic Church, despite the singularly powerful position of that Church, in Irish society. Clear's view of the limits of female autonomy in congregations was further analysed in some shorter studies.¹⁷

Mary Peckham Magray offered a reconceptualisation of the position and status of nuns in the nineteenth century. Her work expanded and probed a point made by Luddy in the 'Agenda', when she suggested that 'nuns had much greater freedom of action in the earlier part of the century when convents were being established than in the later part where church reorganisation made them much more inflexible'.¹⁸ Peckham Magray agreed that, on the one hand, nuns 'theoretically occupied the most inferior position in the Catholic hierarchical structure'.¹⁹ On the other hand, as her research demonstrated, women religious exercised 'considerable personal, religious and cultural power'.²⁰ Luddy had challenged researchers to consider both the work and the personal views of women religious. 'Did nuns question in any way the meaning of their role in Irish society?' Luddy asked.²¹ Providing an answer to this question became Peckham Magray's task, as she explored their agency and widened our knowledge of what nuns did and what was done to them. She found that bishops and priests regularly 'took credit for their accomplishments', and this had the effect of diminishing their status, while also reducing their significance in Irish social history and in the history of the Catholic Church.²² 'Historians', Peckham Magray pronounced, 'have scarcely begun to explore the significance and complexity of the female orders' relationship to the institutions of Irish Catholicism'.²³

Peckham Magray's work attempted to address the fact that achievements of women religious had been rendered almost invisible. She did this by looking at their role in the modernisation or 'embourgeoisement' of Ireland, by broadening the understanding of cultural transformation at that time, and demonstrating that orders of women religious had a profound impact on social change. Much of this impact was achieved through their work in education, and — to a somewhat lesser degree — in healthcare. Peckham Magray recognised, however, that the very acts of 'embourgeoisement' in which nuns were implicated had a negative impact on convent life. She argued that nuns placed many constraints upon themselves. In part, this kind of behaviour reflected the fact that there were changes in the demographics

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Caitriona Clear, 'Walls within walls: nuns in nineteenth century Ireland' in Chris Curtin (ed.), *Gender in Irish society* (Galway, 1987), pp 134–51; eadem, 'The limits of female autonomy: nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland' in Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds), *Women surviving: studies in Irish women's history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Dublin, 1990), pp 15–50.

¹⁸ MacCurtain, O'Dowd & Luddy, 'Agenda', p. 22

¹⁹ Peckham Magray, *The transforming power of the nuns*, p. 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ MacCurtain, O'Dowd & Luddy, 'Agenda', p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

of convents across the century. By the end of the century, novices were being drawn from the lower middle classes, and they did not share the kind of ‘class authority and elevated status’ that had been very evident in the first generation of Irish nuns, superiors, and convent foundresses.²⁴

While Peckham Magray recognised that Irish nuns ‘prized docility above most other qualities’,²⁵ she nonetheless argued that to focus ‘only on the effects of their subservience to the male hierarchy is to overlook their capacity to shape and influence the church to which they had dedicated their lives’.²⁶ Accordingly, she shone light on some aspects of religious life that had not been given attention, while simultaneously suggesting new areas of research interest, some of which eventually started to be pursued by scholars a decade later. One of these areas was research into the largely ignored subject of the contribution of women religious to nineteenth-century education.

II

While the expansion of convent schooling in the nineteenth century has attracted the attention of several scholars working in the field of women’s history, the standard histories of Irish education gave it little attention.²⁷ In part, this is because there has been a tendency for historians of Irish education to focus on policy and policy-makers. It is notable, for example, that histories of Irish national education paid almost no attention to the way in which convent schools became affiliated to the National Board of Education that was established in 1831. By the late 1850s, 75 per cent of convent elementary schools had become affiliated to the National Board. The large numbers of children accommodated in convent national schools meant that they made a more significant contribution to education than might first be expected. For instance, in 1890, only 3.9 per cent of all national schools were convent national schools, yet 16 per cent of all national school children that year attended convent national schools. The Presentation Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy were the largest providers of convent national schooling, and both of these teaching orders have been examined in scholarship.²⁸ The saving to the

²⁴ See Peckham Magray, *The transforming power of the nuns*, p. 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ Monographs on Irish education have either ignored convent schooling or have given it passing attention: see, for example, Donald Akenson, *The Irish education experiment: the national system of education in the nineteenth century* (London, 1971) and John Coolahan, *Irish education, history and structure* (Dublin, 1981).

²⁸ See, for example, Deirdre Raftery and Catherine Nowlan-Roebuck, ‘Convent schools and national education in nineteenth-century Ireland: negotiating a place within a non-denominational system’ in *History of Education*, xxxvi, no. 3 (2007), pp 353–65; Catherine Nowlan-Roebuck, ‘The Presentation order and national education in nineteenth-century Ireland’ in Deirdre Raftery and Karin Fischer (eds), *Educating Ireland: schooling and social change, 1700–2000* (Dublin, 2014); eadem, ‘Sisters as teachers in nineteenth-century Ireland: the Presentation Order’ in Deirdre Raftery and Elizabeth M. Smyth (eds), *Education, identity and women religious: convents, classrooms and colleges, 1800–1950* (Oxford, 2017), pp 77–98; Raftery *et al.*, *Nano Nagle*; Deirdre Raftery, Catriona Delaney and Deirdre Bennett, ‘The legacy of a pioneer of female education in Ireland: tercentennial considerations of Nano Nagle and Presentation schooling’ in *History of Education*, xlviii, no. 2 (2018), pp 197–211; Hilary Minns, ‘Catherine McAuley and the education of Irish Roman

Treasury, and to local resources, was substantial: nuns almost always provided the school buildings, equipment and furniture, and they were a source of cheap labour, as they were paid about one-third of the salary of lay teachers. Additionally, in some instances they were not paid at all: ‘industrial subjects’ such as crochet and lace-making were taught by ‘Work Mistresses’ in national schools. The Commissioners for National Education only made payments towards the salaries of Work Mistresses if they were lay women: ‘Nuns who occupied these positions could not receive this salary.’²⁹ In convent secondary schools, their labour value was also considerable. The efficient and cheap running of boarding schools was possible because the nuns were always present in their convents, not only to teach, but also to prepare, cook and serve meals, manage infirmaries, and supervise study halls and dormitories. Teaching was undertaken by choir sisters, while house sisters, or lay sisters, undertook the domestic work of the convent. In most religious orders, it was their combined labour that made boarding schools and convent day schools not only a possibility but a common feature of many Irish towns by the end of the nineteenth century.³⁰ Indeed, one of the striking impacts of the decline in vocations to religious life in the late 1960s was the loss of free, in-house staff, to run boarding schools. To date, no researchers have attempted to impute the economic value of the contribution of women religious to education, though it would be a worthwhile and important undertaking. A model for such work is suggested by the approach taken by Luddy, in her research on the funding of convents.³¹

There is another value to convent schools that has been ignored in standard histories of education, and that is the contribution that such schools made to the advancement of educational opportunities for Irish girls. While only 2.8 per cent of Catholic girls received a secondary education in 1901, 91 per cent of them attended convent schools.³² Orders of teaching sisters provided secondary schooling in fee-charging day schools, and in ‘superior’ boarding schools (also known as ‘pension schools’) and used the profits from these schools to fund their ‘free schools’ (also known as ‘poor schools’). This system of supporting one school with the surplus made from another was used by many orders including, but not limited to, the Dominicans (O.P.), the Loreto Sisters (I.B.V.M.), the St Louis Sisters (S.S.L.) and the Religious of the Sacred Heart (R.S.C.J.). There is, however, surprisingly little research on these orders.³³ Some religious orders also ran

Catholic children in the mid-nineteenth century’ in Mary Hilton and Pam Hirsch (eds), *Practical visionaries: women, education and social progress, 1790–1930* (Harlow, 2000), pp 52–66.

²⁹ Raftery and Nowlan-Roebuck, ‘Convent schools and national education’, p. 363.

³⁰ Most, though not all, teaching orders had a two-tier system of choir and lay sisters. The Sisters of St Louis (S.S.L.), for example, did not have that division within their communities.

³¹ Maria Luddy, ‘“Possessed of fine properties”: power, authority and the funding of convents in Ireland, 1780–1900’ in Maarten Van Dijk, Jan de Maeyer, Jeffrey Tyssens and Jimmy Koppen (eds), *The economics of providence* (Leuven, 2012), pp 227–46.

³² Data drawn from the 1901 census, noted in Peckham Magray, *The transforming power of the nuns*, p. 81.

³³ A notable exception is Máire Kealy’s scholarly monograph entitled *Dominican education in Ireland, 1830–1930* (Dublin, 2007). There is no study of the contribution to education in Ireland made by the R.S.C.J., though there is an important scholarly study of their foundress: see Phil Kilroy, *Madeleine Sophie Barat: a life* (Cork, 2000). A study drawing on the Loreto archives gives insight into the Loreto foundress in Ireland, Teresa Ball, and the many

orphanages, industrial schools, reformatories and asylums, and these have received some attention from scholars.³⁴ While Jane Barnes provided a ground-breaking examination of industrial schools and reformatories in 1989, her work looked at selected institutions for both boys and girls. There is need for a systematic study of educational provisions for girls made by the female religious orders, in these institutions. A recent major work by Jacinta Prunty explored the reformatories, industrial schools and asylums run by one order, Our Lady of Charity, in Ireland. More interest has been shown in how these institutions operated in the twentieth century, though research could be done on the nineteenth century, drawing not only on archival sources but also on published reports.³⁵

The curriculum of convent schools has received some attention, especially with reference to fee-charging schools for the middle classes. Attention was drawn to this area by Anne V. O'Connor, who argued that there was a 'revolution in girls' secondary education' in the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ O'Connor highlighted in particular the schools run by the Dominican and Loreto nuns which competed successfully in the examinations of the Intermediate Board, that had been opened to girls from 1878. More recently, the work of Ciaran O'Neill and Mary Hatfield has added to scholarship on convent schooling for the middle classes.³⁷ While the tensions between prominent churchmen and women religious who favoured academic education for girls has been noted, this area more than merits closer attention.³⁸

international foundations made in her lifetime: see Deirdre Raftery, *Teresa Ball and Loreto education: convents and the colonial world, 1794–1875* (Dublin, 2022). The work of the Sisters of St Louis has been examined in Éilís Ni Thiarnaigh, 'St Louis convent and high school: a hundred years in Rathmines' in *Dublin Historical Record*, lxvii, no. 2 (autumn/winter 2014), pp 42–53. Unpublished work includes Breda Rice, "'Half women are not for our times": a study of the contribution of the Loreto order to women's education in Ireland, 1822–1922' (M.Ed. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1990), and see, for example, John Manton, 'Towards the making of a medical Mother Superior: Marie Martin in Calabar, 1921–24' (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1999).

³⁴ See Joseph Robins, *The lost children* (Dublin, 1980); Jane Barnes, *Irish industrial schools, 1868–1908* (Dublin, 1989); Jacinta Prunty, *The monasteries, Magdalen asylums and reformatory schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1854–1973* (Dublin, 2018). Magdalen asylums have also been examined in James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen laundries and the nation's architecture of containment* (Notre Dame, IN, 2007).

³⁵ See, for example, the regular *Reports of the inspector appointed to visit reformatory schools in Ireland*, 1863–67, and the *Reports of the inspector appointed to visit reformatory and industrial schools in Ireland*, covering the period 1868–1909; the *Reports of the commissioners for national education in Ireland*, covering the period 1850–52. See also *Report of the reformatories and industrial schools commissioners, minutes of evidence and appendices* [C 3876], H.C. 1884, xlv, 1 (reprinted as *Crime and Punishment: Juvenile Offenders*, iv, in Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers).

³⁶ See Anne V. O'Connor, 'The revolution in girls' secondary education in Ireland, 1860–1910' in Cullen (ed.), *Girls don't do honours*, pp 31–54.

³⁷ Ciaran O'Neill, *Catholics of consequence: transnational education, social mobility, and the Irish Catholic elite, 1850–1900* (Oxford, 2014); Mary Hatfield, *Growing up in nineteenth-century Ireland: a cultural history of middle-class childhood and gender* (Oxford, 2020).

³⁸ For discussions of tensions around the nature and purpose of female education in convent schools and colleges, see Eibhlín Breathnach, 'Charting new waters: women's experience in higher education, 1879–1908' in Cullen (ed.), *Girls don't do honours*, pp 55–78; and Raftery, 'The "mission" of nuns in female education'.

III

Oral history has made a contribution to our understanding of the lives and work of women religious in the twentieth century, and there is scope for further work, gathering the testimonies of sisters. However, the age profile of religious communities is such that some women are no longer able to participate in interviews; physical frailty and the onset of dementia are just two barriers to participating in ethically-sound interview processes. Nonetheless, several studies have already drawn on oral history testimonies, and they offer models that are well worth replicating for a wider cohort of participants. Perhaps the best-known oral study is that of Yvonne McKenna, who interviewed thirty Irish women religious for her doctoral work and published an important book and several articles drawing on that research.³⁹

McKenna's *Made holy: Irish women religious at home and abroad* is the only full-length study of Irish sisters who remained in religious life, based on oral testimonies.⁴⁰ Her aim, when undertaking the interviews, was to explore the reasons women entered convents. Starting with the hypothesis that attraction to religious life was not 'passive response to the scarcity of eligible bachelors and ... limited opportunities', she allowed her participants to reflect on their youth, education and family life; sisters also talked of their own dreams and ambitions, the family reactions to their religious vocations, and their individual and spiritual motivations. Some of the participants taught in convent schools in Ireland, while others were attracted to missionary life. For some, missionary work allowed them to leave Ireland without any of the perceived 'negative connotations' of emigration, while others were aware that missionaries attained the status of heroines 'back home'.⁴¹ Several confessed to being drawn to a somewhat 'romantic picture of missionary life' when they were young.⁴² In their imaginations, the mission field was an exotic setting and they were the actors 'at the centre of the drama'.⁴³ Missionary work seemed to present the possibility to young women that they could do something really worthwhile with their lives, and was seen as 'a superior life path to follow'.⁴⁴ The oral accounts are rich in detail on the childhood and school-days of the women, and Irish family life; they also offer insight into how women selected the orders that they joined, and several made a clear decision not to enter the orders of women by whom they had been educated. Additionally, the women reflect on how their families reacted when they joined convents: some women felt they had failed to do 'the normal thing' of marrying and providing their parents with grandchildren.

³⁹ Yvonne McKenna, 'Forgotten migrants: Irish women religious in England, 1930s–1960s' in *International Journal of Population Geography*, ix, no. 8 (2003), pp 295–308; eadem, 'A gendered revolution: Vatican II and Irish women religious' in *Irish Feminist Review*, x, no. 2 (2005), 75–93; eadem, 'Entering religious life, claiming subjectivity: Irish nuns, 1930s–1960s' in *Women's History Review* xv, no. 2 (2006), pp 189–211; eadem, *Made holy: Irish women religious at home and abroad* (Dublin, 2006).

⁴⁰ A distinction here is made between McKenna's examination of the lived experiences of nuns who spent their lives in religion, and the study of eight former sisters, examined by Camillus Metcalfe in *For God's sake: the hidden life of Irish nuns* (Dublin, 2014).

⁴¹ McKenna, 'Entering religious life', p. 196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 197

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

While McKenna's study included women from religious orders with varied apostolates, recent studies by Regan and Raftery look specifically at missionary orders.⁴⁵ Many of the participants in their studies were attracted to religious life while still schoolgirls, and they were influenced by sisters who returned to Ireland, 'questing' for vocations at schools around the country. Most of the women discussed the influence that their own mothers had on them. Several talked about the large numbers of children born to their mothers, and they were aware at an early age of the seemingly endless amount of work that their mothers had to do in Irish farming homes in the 1950s and 1960s. The oral accounts also offer insight into the working lives of missionary sisters in Africa and South-East Asia, and to the many small ways in which they tried to retain their own national identity, as Irish-born women living far from home, in communities with sisters from several countries.

Oral accounts are also the focus of study by Camillus Metcalfe, in which she interviewed women (eight sisters, and two women who had left religious life). Metcalfe — a former sister — is not a historian and she indicated that her book was 'not a historical or factual account of events'.⁴⁶ She was prompted to conduct her research in the late 1990s, when 'revelations of abuse by priests and nuns ... daily streamed through television, radio and print media'.⁴⁷ At that time, Metcalfe was a member of a religious order, and she explained that her role as an interviewer was to provide 'empathetic listening' and to construct 'a story or a narrative'.⁴⁸ Her positionality is clear at the start of the book, and she stated that she believes that historical truth 'is impossible to access after the fact'.⁴⁹ The interviews are presented verbatim, and Metcalfe offers her analysis of 'the hidden life of the convent' through 'the use of psychoanalytic concepts'.⁵⁰ The interviews offer historians material for analysis, mindful that the themes selected by Metcalfe were chosen because she was broadly interested in examining what she calls 'the paradoxical nature of religious life', whereby people who take religious vows to love and care for the poor, can also be 'cruel human beings who had little compassion for those entrusted to their care'.⁵¹ However, the participants covered a range of topics during their conversations, such as the small 'economies' that they had to make during the Second World War. Their accounts of day-to-day family life in rural Irish households in the 1940s, which included descriptions of killing and bleeding a pig and making clothes from old flour sacks, will be of interest to historians of the family and childhood.⁵²

⁴⁵ See Deirdre Raftery, 'From Kerry to Katong: transnational influences in convent and novitiate life for the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, c.1908–1950' in Deirdre Raftery and Elizabeth M. Smyth (eds), *Education, identity and women religious: convents, classrooms and colleges* (London, 2015), pp 109–35; Ellen Regan and Deirdre Raftery, 'Out of Africa: oral histories of missionaries and volunteers in education, c.1950–2015' in *History of Education*, lii, no. 6 (2021), pp 517–35.

⁴⁶ Metcalfe, *For God's sake*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp 57, 117–19.

IV

An area that has attracted scholarship in recent years is the study of how Irish-born women religious were ‘missioned’ outside Ireland, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some orders were involved in missions for the ‘conversion to Christianity’, while others served Irish Catholic migrants, following them to England, North America and Australia, in order to protect their faith and educate their children. Suellen Hoy estimated that between 4,000 and 7,000 Irish-born women went to the United States as either professed religious or aspirants to religious life in the period between 1812 and 1914.⁵³ Barbra Mann Wall, in her research on women religious in the twentieth century, notes that Ireland had more missionary sisters in the field in Africa than any other European country.⁵⁴ My own estimate, based on archival searches and the creation of databases of Irish-born women religious, is that more than 20,000 Irish-born women religious were involved in education overseas between the start of the nineteenth century and the Second Vatican Council. I do not have data on Irish women religious involved in healthcare overseas.

While male missionary religious have attracted much more scholarship than women, there is scope for much work on Irish women religious overseas. The Irish Ursulines left for the United States in 1812; the Irish Presentation Sisters were also early to enter the mission field, sending Sisters to Newfoundland in 1833. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto) made a foundation from Dublin in India in 1841, while the Irish Mercy Sisters were in parts of England in the 1830s and 1840s, expanding to Australia in 1846 and America in 1851. The 1840s saw Irish Loreto Sisters make foundations in Mauritius, Gibraltar and Canada, while the 1850s saw very rapid Mercy expansion internationally fuelled by Irish vocations. As I have noted elsewhere, by the end of the nineteenth century, other orders — such as the Dominicans, the Society of the Sacred Heart, the Infant Jesus Sisters, the Good Shepherd Sisters, the Brigidines, the Poor Clares and the Irish Sisters of Charity — had also expanded overseas, sending thousands of Irish nuns to staff their schools and hospitals.⁵⁵

In my own work, I have attempted to explore the transnational mobility of Irish women religious in the long nineteenth century, through an analysis of three interconnected areas: their management of international recruitment networks, the advantageous use of personal/family networks and their movement of resources (human and financial) around the globe.⁵⁶ By adopting the optic of transnationalism, historians can explore the rotation of ideas and people ‘beyond national boundaries’. Similarly, as Nelleke Bakker has argued, it is possible to examine ways in which pedagogical ideas and concepts are circulated.⁵⁷ Irish teaching sisters who travelled around the globe were very much a part of the ‘movement, ebb and

⁵³ Suellen Hoy, ‘The recruitment and emigration of Irish religious women to the United States, 1812–1914’ in *Journal of Women’s History*, vi, no. 4 / vi, no. 1 (winter/spring 1995), p. 64.

⁵⁴ Barbra Mann Wall, *Into Africa: a transnational history of Catholic medical missions and social change* (New Brunswick, 2015), p. 30.

⁵⁵ Raftery, ‘“*Je suis d’aucune Nation*”’, p. 515.

⁵⁶ Deirdre Raftery, ‘Teaching sisters and transnational networks: recruitment and education expansion in the long nineteenth century’ in *History of Education*, xliv, no. 6 (2015), pp 717–28.

⁵⁷ Nelleke Bakker, ‘Westward bound? Dutch education and cultural transfer in the mid-twentieth century’ in *Paedagogica Historica*, l, nos 1–2 (2014), p. 216.

circulation’ of education ideas.⁵⁸ Archival collections, such as those of the Religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart (R.S.C.J.), the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters, all offer a window on how Irish-born women religious experienced overseas mission. These collections, and others, also give some insight into how Irish nuns were perceived in the countries that received them. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, Irish-born choir sisters were less likely to be viewed as ethnically Irish than Irish-born lay sisters. The former group were more like to be members of the middle and upper ranks and were educated; they blended easily into international communities of women religious and their national identity was rarely noted. As one R.S.C.J. choir sister said, ‘*Je suis d’aucune Nation*’.⁵⁹ Irish-born lay sisters were mainly the daughters of small shopkeepers, farmers or labourers. Their Irishness was a characteristic that was often noted: necrologies and obituaries refer to their Irish ‘brogues’, their ‘deep Irish faith’ and their ‘Irish smile’.⁶⁰ Obituaries of Irish-born choir sisters, on the other hand, rarely included such personal comments and tended to be restrained in tone. The archives of orders involved in missionary activity are sources for research: mission annals, travel diaries, letters home and many types of missionary publication are available to scholars and merit attention.

V

Margaret MacCurtain’s work on women religious has pointed to the fact that their contribution to healthcare — as nurses, doctors, physiotherapists and hospital managers — challenges the notion that women ‘crowded into convents only because of economic and social conditions’.⁶¹ Though some work has been done on orders involved in healthcare, including the Medical Missionaries of Mary, the Holy Rosary Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy, there is much room for further work on Irish sisters who were involved in hospital medicine and patient care, and in philanthropic work that included building clinics, hospitals and nursing homes.⁶² There is no recent scholarly study of Mary Aikenhead and the Sisters of Charity, while full-scale studies of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy have tended to be penned by members of the order.⁶³ The paucity of

⁵⁸ Raftery, ‘Teaching sisters and transnational networks’, p. 720.

⁵⁹ Fanny Cronin R.S.C.J. to Rev. Mother Lehon R.S.C.J., 20 Nov. 1883 (Society of the Sacred Heart General Archives, Rome, C IV). Cronin wrote: ‘*Je ne suis ni française, ni irlandaise; je suis d’aucune Nation; je suis Cosmopolitaine, Religieuse du S. Coeur*’ (trans: I am neither French nor Irish; I have no nationality; I am cosmopolitan, a Religious of the Sacred Heart).

⁶⁰ Raftery, “‘*Je suis d’aucune Nation*’”, pp 527–8.

⁶¹ Margaret MacCurtain, ‘Late in the field: Catholic sisters in twentieth-century Ireland and the new religious history’, in Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds), *Chattel, servant or citizen: women’s status in church, state and society* (Belfast, 1995), p. 43.

⁶² The Irish Medical Missionaries of Mary are examined in Mann Wall, *Into Africa*. The founding of the Holy Rosary Sisters is examined in Catherine KilBride, *The first ten professed Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary* (Dublin, 2019).

⁶³ See, for example, the work of the scholar and member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Mary C. Sullivan, who has served as official historian for the Sisters of Mercy for many years: Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the tradition of Mercy* (Dublin, 1995); eadem, *The path of Mercy: the life of Catherine McAuley* (Dublin, 2012). Short

scholarly work was raised by Luddy in the 'Agenda'. While she recognised that, at that time, 'the only women for whom we have a large number of biographies are the founders of religious congregations', she also added that most of these 'are hagiographical and have a rhetoric all of their own'.⁶⁴

New biographical studies of women religious' work would repair damage done by the nineteenth-century genre of religious hagiography, a form of uncritical biographical writing that served to emphasise the virtues of its subject and that was sometimes published to support a cause for canonisation. Hagiographies were invariably penned by churchmen, while biographies of 'exemplary nuns' were written by women religious for use in the novitiate and were usually published anonymously. This genre of writing cast a shadow over biographical writing on nuns, partly because its purpose was to praise unreservedly, and partly because it sometimes introduced unsubstantiated 'facts' into narrative accounts of women's lives, that became, as it were, set in aspic. A typical trope, for instance, was to describe a worldly challenge that the young aspirant had to face, or a temptation that she had to resist. Parties and balls, the lure of romance and beautiful clothes were 'worldly attractions' that had to be sacrificed. Churchmen presented their subjects as pious and humble women who should be emulated. But the long-term impact of such books is that they confused the narrative and obscured the work and the achievements of their subjects. The prose style of nineteenth-century hagiographies was deliberately cloying; today, it all but repels readers, saving those who use hagiographies to find threads of narrative about the trajectory of a nun's life that can be pursued through systematic research. However, sometimes that thread breaks, because papers entrusted to nineteenth-century hagiographers were not always returned to convents. There are several possible reasons for this. First, the author may have considered that his 'word' on the matter of a foundress would be the final one, and, therefore, there was no need to preserve her papers any longer; secondly, the author may have wished to excise information from the historical record; and finally, he may have casually mislaid the papers, never imagining that records of the lives of women religious were of sufficient importance to return them carefully to the lending congregation.

At this point, it is generally agreed by scholars that there is a need for more lay researchers to reassess foundresses in scholarly biographical studies.⁶⁵ That is not to imply that historians who are sisters should not continue to write about women religious: it is lazy for book reviewers and lay scholars to dismiss women religious as having a bias in favour of the Catholic Church. Two distinguished sister-historians, Margaret MacCurtain and Phil Kilroy, have been critical of the ways in which the institutional church has treated women. Additionally Kilroy, most recently, has provided 'a compelling analysis of the intersection of the reforms of

studies of several convents of the Sisters of Mercy have been compiled by Sr Pius O'Brien: see, for example, Pius O'Brien, *The Sisters of Mercy of Ennis* (privately published by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Diocese of Killaloe, 1992); eadem, *The Sisters of Mercy of Birr and Nenagh* (privately published by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Killaloe Mercy Generalate, Ennis); eadem, *The Sisters of Mercy of Kilrush and Kilkee* (privately published in Limerick by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy); Sr Magdalene Claffey, *The Sisters of Mercy in Meath, 1836–1994* (privately published by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Diocese of Meath, 1994).

⁶⁴ McCurtain, Luddy & O'Dowd, 'Agenda', p. 26.

⁶⁵ Deirdre Raftery and Elizabeth M. Smyth, 'Introduction' in eadem (eds), *Education, identity and women religious*, p. 45.

the Second Vatican Council with the discourses and practices of feminism'.⁶⁶ Kilroy has also written a scholarly biography of Madeleine Sophie Barat, foundress of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (R.S.C.J.),⁶⁷ while Jacinta Prunty, a historian and a member of the Holy Faith order, has provided an exhaustive scholarly study of the Daughters of Charity in Ireland.⁶⁸ The fact that female orders comprise an ageing population in Ireland, and some are now coming to completion, means that histories of orders and of their foundresses will be written by lay scholars henceforth. This is a reality that presents us with potentiality and challenges.

VI

Luddy, recognising the value of biographies of women religious, challenged readers of the 'Agenda' to consider writing 'a feminist analysis of an individual founder's life'.⁶⁹ This is an important and compelling proposal, which presupposes the availability of sources. The possibility of developing a substantial and important corpus of research on the history of women religious in Ireland relies on scholars having access to relevant archives. Congregational records are private collections and have to be maintained at the expense of the congregation. Some collections are still housed in private dwellings or convents that now serve as retirement homes for elderly sisters, where access by the public is not possible. Collections can only be made available to scholars under certain conditions, including the presence of an archivist. Lack of access, mainly where congregations cannot afford an archivist, has been a barrier to research in the past. However, increasingly religious orders are appointing lay archivists and opening their collections to scholars. Many such collections are now accessible. Margaret MacCurtain, in 1995, hinted at the richness of such collections, writing that they 'possess records of unique value for the historian'.⁷⁰ The wealth of material in convent collections has also been noted by Luddy in her study of religious archives.⁷¹ One of the requirements under canon law is that religious houses keep records. House annals, therefore, contain a regular account of the activity of the convent. Though they present a somewhat curated account of events, they can be of great use to the researcher. Additionally, members of religious communities traditionally held offices such as bursar, novice mistress and infirmarian, and their duties involved some degree of record keeping. Account books, school records, mission annals and the notebooks of the infirmarian exist in many collections. These records give insight into areas such as the costs attached to running a convent, the curricula and content of convent education, the co-ordination of missionary activity and women's health. Indeed, a major American project on Alzheimer's disease that drew extensively on convent archives has pointed to the potential of such collections for medical research.⁷²

⁶⁶ See Phil Kilroy, 'Coming to an edge in history: writing the history of women religious and the critique of Feminism' in *ibid.*, pp 54–108.

⁶⁷ Kilroy, *Madeleine Sophie Barat*.

⁶⁸ Prunty, *Monasteries, Magdalen asylums and reformatory schools*.

⁶⁹ MacCurtain, O'Dowd & Luddy, 'Agenda', p. 26.

⁷⁰ MacCurtain, 'Late in the field', p. 53.

⁷¹ Maria Luddy, 'Convent archives as sources for Irish history' in Rosemary Raughter (ed.), *Religious women and their history: breaking the silence* (Dublin, 2005), pp 98–115.

⁷² The Nun Study of Aging and Alzheimer's Disease was established under Dr David Snowdon, at the University of Minnesota in 1986, with funding from the National

Until relatively recently, in many orders, the duty of keeping records and trying to gather them into a formal collection or archive has fallen to a retired sister, who could be spared from teaching or healthcare work. In some cases, these sisters have undertaken archival training. Some have adapted spaces in convents and houses for the storage of their collections, but they do not have the resources to prepare these collections for researcher access. Larger congregations have been in a position to create an archive and appoint a lay archivist. At a recent U.C.D. ConventCollections seminar on ‘Archives of Women Religious: The Present and the Future’ (April 2022), it was clear that many collections, such as those of the Sisters of Mercy, Presentations, Dominicans, Holy Faith, Religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart, Sisters of St Louis, Medical Missionaries of Mary, the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto), are all now open to researchers. Other collections have been deposited in libraries and archives; for example, the collection of the Brigidines is part of the Delaney archive at St Patrick’s, Carlow College. There are other collections that are being catalogued and there are also many collections which can be accessed by arrangement if there is someone available to facilitate the researcher. The urgency around making provision for the future of collections has been noted by both scholars and women religious. A recently-formed network in the U.S.A. is developing a model for the kind of strategy that is necessary to safeguard the collections of religious communities, but the advanced age of religious in this country suggests that even if a viable model is developed in the U.S.A., it will soon be too late to work with communities to develop something similar in Ireland.⁷³ This pressing issue was the focus of a panel including the U.C.D. ConventCollections research network, at the 2022 Conference of the History of Women Religious (USA), University of Notre Dame.⁷⁴

Though there are still some challenges to researchers in terms of access to smaller collections, the much-improved situation concerning access to larger collections means that there is the potential for new research. One of the tasks in the future will involve examining how Irish women religious experienced the Second Vatican Council, which was opened by Pope John XXIII in 1963. Nuns were not allowed to participate formally in the council, yet their lives changed dramatically

Institute on Aging: see David A. Snowdon, ‘Aging and Alzheimer’s Disease: lessons from the Nun Study’ in *The Gerontologist*, xxxvii (1997), pp 150–56. See also Suzanne L. Tyas, David A. Snowdon, Mark F. Desrosiers, Kathryn P. Riley and William R. Markesbery, ‘Healthy ageing in the Nun Study: definition and neuropathologic correlates’ in *Age and Ageing*, xxxvi (2007), pp 650–55. The value of the convent archives in this study was discussed in Gari-Anne Patzwald and Carol Marie Wildt, ‘The use of convent archival records in medical research: the school sisters of Notre Dame archives and the Nun Study’ in *The American Archivist*, lxvii (2004), pp 86–106.

⁷³ The Archival Resources for Catholic Collections was established following a working conference at Boston College, in 2018. For further details see <https://archivalrcc.org/>. A Working Paper was published in 2019 and working groups have since been formed. This author established, and co-chairs, the ARCC Transnational Network working group.

⁷⁴ U.C.D. ConventCollections is a research network specialising in research on the history of women religious, and it conducts digital projects with congregational archivists: see <https://www.ucd.ie/conventcollections/>. H-WBRI is a U.K.-Ireland society that hosts an annual conference on the history of women religious, and provides an online bibliographical tool and listserv for scholars: see <https://historyofwomenreligious.org/>.

as a result of some of the pronouncements that followed. Having been trained to think as a group and to avoid articulating views and feelings, nuns had to learn to adapt to new ways of living. Having the freedom to learn to drive a car, visit their families and go shopping in public meant that some of the rigidity associated with convent life came to an end, yet we know little of how nuns responded to post-conciliar changes. Large numbers of sisters left religious life in the decade that followed the Second Vatican Council. Metcalfe's book gives a voice to a handful of those who left, but there is a need for research into the reactions and adaptations of those who stayed. While work has been done in the U.S. and Britain concerning this period of great change in religious life, almost no attention has been paid in Ireland to the experience of *aggiornamento*.⁷⁵

Research is also needed into how nuns accommodated the significant changes that were heralded by other changes in Irish social and public life. For example, their experience of the introduction of the free post-primary education schemes of the late 1960s merits detailed examination, as it directly affected many teaching orders.⁷⁶ The fact that free secondary education was introduced in Ireland at exactly the same time that orders were becoming familiar with the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council is significant; huge change was expected from women religious, not only in how they ran their schools but also in terms of the evolving charism of their orders, the abandoning of many routines and the adaptation of the habit.

It is striking, when comparing international and Irish scholarship, that the latter does not include any surveys of Irish women religious in the early twentieth century, and there is no bibliographic tool to aid scholars working on Irish nuns. In contrast, across the last forty years, historians in the U.S.A. and Australia have made sustained attempts to survey the field via monographs; they have also produced bibliographical studies and well-annotated directories of congregational archives, all of which are useful to scholars working on the thousands of Irish-born nuns who worked in these countries in the nineteenth century.⁷⁷ In

⁷⁵ It is possible to get some insight from studies that were written for a different purpose, such as Yvonne McKenna's *Unveiled: nuns talking* (London, 1992). Additionally, the impact of the Second Vatican Council on Irish missionary nuns is briefly examined in Deirdre Raftery, Jyoti Atwal, Mags Liddy, Ruth Ferris, Seaneen Sloan and Marie Clarke, 'Passing the baton: legacy and leadership in convent schools in India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan' in *Paedagogica Historica* (published online 17 Jan. 2022), DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2021.2004175. However, we need a detailed study of how Irish sisters reacted to the changes and to the concept of *aggiornamento* that animated debate in the post-Conciliar period. *Aggiornamento* was one of the key terms of the Second Vatican Council, and referred to the modernisation of religious life.

⁷⁶ For a study that raises questions around this, see Catriona Delaney and Deirdre Raftery, 'Becoming "everything rolled into one": understanding how sister-teachers experienced the immediate impact of the free education scheme, c.1958–1968, an oral history approach' in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, liii, no. 1 (2021), pp 35–49.

⁷⁷ Monographs on women religious in the United States that are of particular use to scholars interested in the history of Irish nuns in the U.S.A. include Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited lives: how nuns shaped Catholic culture and American life* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Anne M. Butler, *Across God's frontiers: Catholic sisters in the American West, 1850–1920* (Chapel Hill, 2012); Barbra Mann Wall, *Unlikely entrepreneurs: Catholic sisters and the hospital marketplace, 1865–1925* (Columbus, 2005); and Margaret M. McGuinness, *Called to serve: a history of nuns in America* (New York, 2013). For historiographical work on women religious in the United States, see Elizabeth Kolmer, 'Catholic women religious and women's history: a survey of the literature' in *American Quarterly*, xxx, no. 5 (winter

Belgium and Britain, historiographical work has also been published, and scholars of French orders have published monographs that have greatly added to the literature on nineteenth-century nuns.⁷⁸

There is also a need to read against the grain, when using different types of sources on women religious (archival records, biographies and autobiographies, as well as novels), to attempt a discussion of aspects of convent life that are still missing from the literature — emotions and religious life for women; women's sexuality within convents; incest as a factor in girls' decision to enter convents — all of these areas are still missing from scholarly research within the Irish context. Further, we know very little about women who left convents or who rebelled against their vows in different ways, and little attention has been paid to the lives of lay sisters.⁷⁹

Another area that merits analysis is the dowry system, used by many religious orders. Common misconceptions about nuns' dowries include the belief that women could only become choir nuns if they entered the convent with a dowry; this has been debunked by Raftery and Bennett with reference to several orders that had foundations in Ireland. Analyses of entrance and profession registers show that young women who were well-educated, or who were considered to be highly educable, were sometimes accepted without dowries. Further, some women brought with them far larger dowries than were needed for their own upkeep. This surplus was used to support those with small dowries and those with no dowries.⁸⁰ The ways that women religious managed their money, and

1978), pp 639–51; eadem, *Religious women in the United States: a survey of the influential literature from 1950 to 1983* (Delaware, 1984); Bernadette McCauley, 'Nuns' stories: writing the history of women religious in the United States' in *American Catholic Studies*, cxxv (winter 2014), pp 51–68; Carol K. Coburn, 'An overview of the historiography of women religious: a twenty-five year retrospective' in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, xxii (winter 2004), pp 1–26. Three invaluable directories for scholars working on the history of women religious, including but not only Irish-born women, in the U.S. and Australia, are Evangeline Thomas, *Women religious: history sources, a guide to repositories in the United States* (New York and London, 1983); M. R. MacGinley, *A dynamic of hope: institutes of women religious in Australia* (Darlinghurst, NSW, 2002); Thomas McCarthy, *Guide to the Catholic sisterhoods in the United States* (6th ed., Washington D.C., 2006).

⁷⁸ Barbara Walsh, *Roman Catholic nuns in England and Wales, 1800–1937: a social history* (Dublin, 2002); Carmen Mangion, *Contested identities: Catholic women religious in nineteenth-century England and Wales* (Manchester, 2008); Bart Hellinckx, Frank Simon and Marc Depaep, *The forgotten contribution of the teaching sisters: a historiographical essay on the educational work of Catholic women religious in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Leuven, 2010); Susan O'Brien, 'A survey of research and writing about Roman Catholic women's congregations in Great Britain and Ireland' in Jan de Maeyer, Sofie Leplaie and Joachim Schmiedel (eds), *Religious institutes in Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Leuven, 2004); Sarah Curtis, *Educating the faithful: religion, schooling and society in nineteenth-century France* (DeKalb, 2000); Rebecca Rogers, *From the salon to the schoolroom: educating bourgeois girls in nineteenth-century France* (University Park, PA, 2005).

⁷⁹ The broad theme of sexuality and convent life in nineteenth-century literature is addressed in Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth-century anti-Catholic discourses* (London, 2005); some attention to the theme of rebellion and resistance in convents has been noted by Deirdre Raftery, 'Rebels with a cause: obedience, resistance and convent life, 1800–1940' in *History of Education*, xvii, no. 6 (2013), pp 729–44. For a discussion of lay sisters in teaching congregations, see Christine Trimmingham Jack, 'The lay sister in educational history and memory' in *History of Education*, xxix, no. 3 (2000), pp 181–94.

⁸⁰ See Raftery and Bennett, 'A great builder', *passim*.

the power that great personal wealth gave to some nuns and religious orders, demand further analysis. Additionally, their involvement in the design and construction of their convents merits detailed review. No scholar has attempted a comprehensive history of Irish convent buildings, though scholars including Gillian O'Brien and Jessie Castle have provided insight into individual convents, convent architecture and the materiality of religious life.⁸¹

There is also need for lexical tools to assist the researcher, and work that explains the processes of internal change experienced by orders. The language and customs of religious life have changed across time, and a challenge to scholars is being able to develop the necessary religious literacy in order to work with archival collections, and in order to understand the rule and constitutions of orders. For example, though most orders organised themselves into 'provinces', these have merged and changed across time, as convents closed and vocations went into decline. There have also been many internal changes in orders, as hierarchical structures were removed and roles and titles became obsolete. For example, in the nineteenth century, leadership in many orders was provided by the discreetes (nuns who held offices such as mother superior, bursar and novice mistress). These terms have been replaced, and documents from the second half of the twentieth century show the emergence of the concept of 'leadership teams'. Understanding the changing organisational structure of religious orders, and changes in the language of religious life, are central to being able to make sense of records.

An area that MacCurtain, O'Dowd and Luddy could not have envisaged when they wrote the 'Agenda' was the development of information technology and digital research tools. They arguably could not have imagined the benefits to scholarship that would be released by two tools that we now take for granted: the internet and e-mail. Additionally, information technology innovations across the 1990s and 2000s have made an enormous difference to historians and archivists. Software allows archivists to create digital finding aids that can be shared remotely and to create extensive databases of members of congregations. Hardware, such as high-resolution scanners and cameras that are built into tablets and phones, have changed the way researchers plan research trips and use archival collections. Methodologies have also been influenced by technological innovations; for example, the use of data mining and textual analysis has been influenced by software innovations that allow historians to develop statistical observations.⁸²

⁸¹ See, for example, Kealy, *Dominican education in Ireland*; Ann Power, *The Brigidine sisters in Ireland, America, Australia and New Zealand, 1807–1922* (Dublin, 2018); Prunty, *The monasteries, Magdalen asylums and reformatory schools*. For recent work on women religious and the construction of convent buildings, see Jessie Castle and Gillian O'Brien, "'I am building a house": Nano Nagle's Georgian convents' in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, xix (2016), pp 54–75; and Deirdre Raftery and Deirdre Bennett, 'Female enterprise, architectural ambition, and the construction of convents' in Tim Allender and Stephanie Spencer (eds), *Femininity and the history of women's education* (London, 2021), pp 175–99. The work of Tracy Collins offers a perspective on how to approach the study of the gendered space of the convent: see Collins, 'Space and place: archaeologies of female monasticism in later medieval Ireland' in Victoria Blud, Diane Heath and Eintat Klafter (eds), *Gender in medieval places, spaces and thresholds* (London, 2019).

⁸² For example, in my own work, the creation of databases drawn from the entrance and profession registers of dozens of religious orders on four continents, has allowed me to

The growing field of digital humanities has also enabled historians to use technology and computational methods in data visualisations and in the geo-spatial mapping of information. Software is also used in network analysis, a set of techniques which can allow historians to analyse social structures and connections that emerge from the recurrence of relations. A particularly fine example of the use of quantitative approaches including network analysis is the RECIRC project at the University of Galway.⁸³ As I have argued elsewhere, these tools and approaches can allow scholars to interrogate the contexts and the economic and social conditions in which religious orders, and individual convents either flourished or declined. They also help scholars to efficiently analyse regional, national and international patterns concerning religious life, and the lived experience of nuns.⁸⁴ Through the use of such tools, it will be possible to develop a vastly more nuanced and complicated understanding of where women religious entered convents and where they carried out their mission. Finally, the potential for developing digital solutions to the dispersed nature of convent and missionary records, through virtual reunification projects, needs both financial investment and extensive work.⁸⁵ Virtual reunification is ‘the process whereby heritage collections that are physically dispersed can be reunified on a digital platform’.⁸⁶ Because many women religious regularly moved from place to place, and there have been thousands of convents across hundreds of provinces, the records relating to any one foundation can be scattered across several continents. For most historians, the cost attached to visiting dozens of collections in many countries is prohibitive; virtual reunification projects will change this. While scholars understand and respect the significance of the physical archive, and the significance of the condition and order in which papers are found and accessioned, we also recognise the social and environmental requirements to make sources more widely available, while reducing our carbon footprint. These are areas in which there is potentiality: investment, research funding and the continued training of generations of scholars will release the potential, if the archives of religious orders are amenable and available to historians.

In ‘An agenda for women’s history in Ireland, 1500–1900’, MacCurtain, O’Dowd and Luddy prompted scholars to consider other questions that still have not been fully answered, such as ‘Did nuns question their place in Irish society?’; ‘Was religious life a protest ... against the role in society allotted to women by the patriarchal church?’; and ‘Did “feminist” leanings motivate women to enter convents, or were they a result of their experiences once they entered?’⁸⁷ Perhaps most compelling of all, was a question posed by MacCurtain *et al.*, which scholars have failed to address directly. They asked: ‘Can we see nuns as feminists?’ Much

extrapolate information on the movement of Irish-born missionary nuns around the globe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

⁸³ RECIRC is the acronym for ‘The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women’s Writing, 1550–1700’: see <https://recirc.nuigalway.ie/>.

⁸⁴ See Deirdre Raftery, ‘The third “wave” is digital: researching histories of women religious in the twenty-first century’ in *American Catholic Studies*, cxxviii, no. 2 (2017), pp 29–50.

⁸⁵ Virtual reunification, and the potential use of convent collections that have been digitised, is discussed in Raftery, ‘The third “wave” is digital’.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸⁷ MacCurtain, O’Dowd & Luddy, ‘Agenda’, pp 22–3.

work remains to be done to answer these, and other, questions. However, with increased access to religious archives, extensive and probing work will become a possibility. As a field of historical enquiry in Ireland, the history of women religious is still young; it is fair to say, however, that MacCurtain, O'Dowd and Luddy encouraged it to begin growing up.